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SUBJECT: MAOISTS' MINORS: INTERVIEWS WITH CHILD RECRUITS

REF: A. (A) KATHMANDU 0446

1B. (B) KATHMANDU 0379

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Interviews with several Maoist child recruits at the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) division in the southwestern city of Nepalgunj indicate force, fear, and physical assault, rather than ideology, as their primary reasons for joining. At least two girls interviewed reported sexual abuse during their time as Maoist militia. We expect such forced recruitment to increase as security forces continue to detain more suspects during the state of emergency--thereby depleting the Maoist militia further. Government policy regarding "soft-core" members of the Maoist militia, including those who are under aged, remains unclear. End summary.

MAIOST RECRUITERS MAKE HOUSE CALLS

2. (SBU) During a Feb. 22-24 visit to the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) division in the southwestern city of Nepalgunj, Ambassador Malinowski, accompanied by former U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Peter Burleigh, who is a Nepali speaker, and DATT, met and interviewed several child recruits of the Maoists who had either surrendered or been captured and were temporarily being held in RNA custody. Their accounts of how they joined the Maoists reveal that the insurgents use intimidation and force to enlist young Nepalis as porters, cooks, and in other support positions. None of the young people interviewed seemed familiar with Maoist ideology, and each cited the use of force, rather than political beliefs, as their reasons for joining. Some, however, reported having been promised a house or other material goods after the revolution. None of the detainees interviewed could confirm meeting any foreign cadre during their time in the field, which, in some cases, spanned more than a year.

3. (SBU) For most of the recruits, their career as Maoists began with a knock on the door of their homes in the middle of the night. Two girls (ages 14 and 12) reported that Maoists had come to their villages in Dang about six months ago and had gone door to door, demanding that each family give up one member to serve the insurgency. Fearing reprisals, the girls' families offered up their daughters. The girls worked as porters, carrying supplies for the insurgents as they moved from place to place, but both reported having been raped--sometimes repeatedly--on a nightly basis by the cadre. The 14-year-old is reportedly pregnant. A 17-year-old girl, who had a local reputation as a good singer, was dragooned into service as a performer for Maoist cultural programs that are staged in remote, rural locations. She said she had been with the Maoists about a year and a half. A 16-year-old boy, originally forced to enlist as a porter and cook, said the cadre eventually gave him some military training and began to use his services as a fighter as well. The boy said he complied because he had no choice in the matter. Another young man, described as a sub-commander, had received weapons training at a Maoist base in Nepal. Since his capture, the teen-ager has been going out on patrol with the RNA. The detainees described their respective home villages as poor and remote. One girl, who said there is no school within walking distance to her home, has never been inside a classroom in her life.

FOR THE WANT OF SOME BENCHES,
A MAOIST WAS MADE

4. (SBU) In at least one case, however, obtuse local officials appear to have inadvertently benefited Maoist recruitment efforts. One teen-aged boy said that as a student, he once asked local authorities why no benches were

available for the village school. The authorities, sensing radical sympathies in his query, immediately branded him a Maoist. His protests to the contrary--that all he really wanted was some benches--were to no avail. Shortly thereafter, real Maoists came to his house, and, noting the cloud of local and apparently inexpungeable suspicion he had fallen under, observed he might as well come with them. Once again, his protests to the contrary--that all he really wanted was some benches--proved fruitless and he was forced to join his putative comrades.

15. (SBU) The young detainees had been held at the RNA barracks in Nepalgunj for approximately 10 days. Before that, they had been held at a brigade barracks in Rolpa for varying lengths of time. At Nepalgunj, they are being held in barracks rooms, not cells, and said they were being given adequate medical treatment. (The girls who had reported sexual abuse have apparently not been checked for signs of sexually transmitted diseases. End note.) None of the detainees interviewed reported any abuse during their time in RNA custody. At meal time, the Ambassador observed the teens eating the same rations given to the soldiers. Division Commander Maj. Gen. Sadip Shah said that a local committee, made up of representatives of the military, police, and civil authority, confers on the case of each suspected Maoist brought to the RNA barracks to decide whether sufficient evidence exists to keep the individual in custody. Those deemed suspicious enough to continue to hold are turned over to the civilian police. (Note: Under the state of emergency, suspects may held up to 90 days without charges. End note.)

16. (SBU) Each of the young detainees interviewed said that if released, they do not intend to return to their villages because of fear of reprisals from neighbors. On the other hand, none seemed to have a clear idea of what to do instead, or to harbor much hope for the future. A 19-year-old captive said that his wife is due to deliver a baby in April. When asked if the military might bring his wife and new baby to him, the young man answered that he wants no one to know that he is in government custody or even alive. If the Maoists learn he is in custody, they will believe him a traitor, placing both the lives of his wife and baby in jeopardy.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) No one, probably including the RNA, has a good idea of how many "hard-core" Maoist cadre have taken up arms against the government, nor how many support militia, like the unfortunate children in Nepalgunj, have been pressed into service against their will. As the state of emergency continues and Government of Nepal (GON) security forces make more arrests, further depleting the ranks of the Maoists' cooks and porters, we expect the volume of forced recruitments to climb. Each of the children said they had joined the Maoists because they felt they had no other alternative. Now that they are out of Maoist hands, they still seem to have the same feeling of hopelessness. Their unwillingness to return to their homes and families indicates just how bleakly they regard their own futures--and how vulnerable they may remain to possible "re-recruitment" efforts if released. GON policy regarding "soft-core" Maoist recruits--especially those under age or who have surrendered--remains unclear. Despite our repeated queries, we have heard no discussion from the GON of prospective rehabilitation or amnesty programs for former Maoist militia or cadre. Such a lack of planning seems short-sighted if the GON's ultimate goal is to persuade the Maoists to lay down their arms. But when the Maoists in question are children conscripted by force, that lack of planning threatens to perpetuate the same cycle of hopelessness, circumscribed opportunity, and poverty that made those children likely recruits in the first place. End comment.

MALINOWSKI